

February 1998

The Egg is Broken, Who Will Make the Omelet?

Ward Shaw
CARL

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shaw, Ward (1998) "The Egg is Broken, Who Will Make the Omelet?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 14.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3293>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

The Egg is Broken, Who Will Make the Omelet?

We Have all this Information, How Will We Organize it?

by **Ward Shaw** (CARL) <wshaw@carl.org>

A version of the paper was delivered at the 1997 Charleston Conference, November 6-8, 1997. — KS

Did any of you see the search for Dot Comm in the newspapers? It was great. There actually is a woman named Dot Comm. She's a retired schoolteacher somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. She was discovered in a nationwide search, and was reportedly quite impressed that she had such an important name. I urge you all to do some research and find that story.

I have a wonderful topic, and I'm going to take a little bit of liberty with it. It's one of those great topics which no one understands, and that means you can talk about anything you want to talk about. As you know, I will do that anyway.

This is a brief essay on omelets. We're going to talk about describing them, making them, and eating them.

As the saying goes, first you have to break some eggs. When you look at all that is going on around us, I think it is very clear that the eggs are broken. We didn't break them, by the way — technology and economics broke them for us. If you need some more evidence of the fact that there's a lot of change going on right now, two days ago in the *Wall Street Journal* there was a fascinating article about newspaper subscriptions. The trend is absolutely down, not only in daily newspaper subscriptions and readership but also in Sunday subscriptions and readership. Interestingly, in the middle of the article, they started talking about access to online information. Subscription paying access to *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* online are both up and the article commented that this is probably related although no one knows quite why or how.

The retiring FCC Chairman, in a speech not long ago, gave print-based classified ad-

vertising fewer than 10 years. That's not very long. When you consider that classified advertising is something more than 50 percent of what makes newspapers go economically, there's an interesting shift going to occur. We all know that journal subscriptions are declining — that is, numbers of subscriptions, even though their prices continue to rise. We can debate and measure which occurs in

which year or how fast or why or whatever, but the trend is pretty clear.

Let's look a little bit carefully, though, at these broken eggs and other potential ingredients before we try omelet-making. You know it's really easy to make an omelet — all you have to do is throw a dozen eggs in a bag and smash it on the floor and then throw the mess in a frying pan. It may not be a very good omelet, but it's an omelet. The trick is not just who is going to make the omelet, but how can we find one that's edible. When it was whole, the egg looked like this — it was that classical information chain — with the author and the publisher and the library and the reader and the bookstore and other institutions — and they all kind of turned back into a chain and created a research cycle. You've all known about that from way back in library school. These dependencies were born of technical and economic necessity and it's technical and economic shifts that have caused them to change. Network and computing technology, along with changing economic patterns, have altered fundamentally the distribution mechanisms so that the traditional chain just doesn't exist anymore.

Authors can publish all by themselves if they want to. Readers can communicate directly with authors or publishers, or themselves, reasonably easily. I do mean reasonably easily. My nine-year-old son decided, for whatever mysterious reason, that this year he wanted to be a Sasquatch for Halloween. Two problems — first, he didn't know what a Sasquatch looks like, and second, he didn't know anything about them in case anybody asked. He did know that they were sometimes called Big Foot. His first move was to get on the World Wide Web, call up Alta Vista or Infocom or one of those search services. He did a search on Big Foot and he got back a whole ream of stuff — all of the horror stories that you've heard about what you get when you search the Web occurred. He got all kinds of things about sneaker manufacturing, and bizarre foot diseases.

He also got some first rate information. First of all, there were lots of pictures. As you know, no one really knows what Sasquatch looks like but there are lots of interpretations and he saw them. He also discovered a fascinating link to a Sasquatch museum research project, part of the University of California at Berkeley. It's located in San Francisco and seems to be the center of research into these alleged crea-

tures. There were ac-

counts of siting studies of alleged footprints, and literally hundreds of other leads. What you actually take away from this is that, for my son, that was exactly like the best public library experience that we could think about. He starts to do this research, and all sort of other ideas come at him. He gets what he wants, but he also gets extended in the process. And that's what we've always talked about as being a great public library experience for kids or, for that matter, for the rest of us.

There are two important differences, of course. One was that he was in complete control of the process from start to finish. He didn't need any help from anyone. He didn't need to interact in any way that he didn't want to interact. The second difference was that he didn't have to go anywhere to do this research. It was immediately at hand. All of this took place in the space of half an hour. He decided he wanted to be a Sasquatch, he didn't know what they looked like — Bang! — He's doing a search and within minutes he's got pictures and all the rest of it and he's off and running. This is not exhaustive research that those of us in ivy-covered halls are accustomed to, but nonetheless it's pretty common. In fact, I think it's probably a lot more common than exhaustive research.

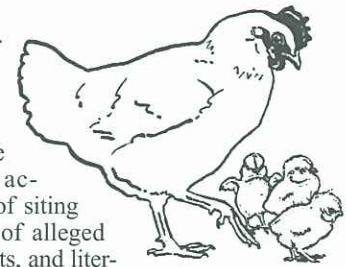
We often mistakenly lump all sorts of disparate information-seeking activities together to make generalizations, and those generalizations are generally misleading. Don't think about that sentence too much, please, but rather think about publishing. Newspapers are not like popular magazines are not like scholarly research journals are not like "summarizing" journals. Entertainment publishing is completely different from information publishing like, for example, *Time* magazine. It is completely different from research publishing like *Brain Research*, all of which is different from what we might call contemplative proselytizing, in journals like *Foreign Affairs Quarterly* where people are writing primarily opinion.

The economics of creation and the effectiveness of various distribution mechanisms differ for each one of those forms. Competitive values differ as well. Entertainment vehicles go head to head for the same dollar. Informing vehicles — *US News and World Report* and *Time* and *Newsweek* — compete directly, selling the same or at least mostly substitutable products.

continued on page 45

"What is true for newspapers is not true for STM journals, even though both are called publishing."

vertising fewer than 10 years. That's not very long. When you consider that classified advertising is something more than 50 percent of what makes newspapers go economically, there's an interesting shift going to occur. We all know that journal subscriptions are declining — that is, numbers of subscriptions, even though their prices continue to rise. We can debate and measure which occurs in



The Egg Is Broken from page 44

Research vehicles are not like that. If you need a paper by so and so, you need that paper and not some other one — unless you're going to cheat.com and the journal that it's in is not very important, at least at the consumer end. After the need is established, the specific journal that the paper is in is not really very crucial. Contemplative proselytizing vehicles are more like research vehicles than they are like information or entertainment. They have their own characteristics, not the least of which is that they tend not to be substitutable for each other. If you buy a copy of *Atlantic Monthly* you might also want to buy another journal like that. They may even lead to each other, much like citation chains.

All this is confusing enough, but completely confounding when you consider that no vehicle nor any form of publication that I know of is a pure type. There are lots of changes, some of them trivial, but a few are profound, and have a great deal to do with the question now before us — who will make the omelet and will it be any good? Just as academic institutions, or more properly the academic elite, have lost control of the Internet — a very interesting shift that's happened in the last couple of years, but another day's subject — so have the traditional players lost control of the informing process, the circle we were talking about. Publishers, aca-

dem institutions, and libraries, because of their economic and technical imperatives early in the cycle, had control of distribution of most information. That has changed. It is very interesting to watch those institution's behaviors as they all scramble to try to preserve their roles.

The second really crucial change that's occurred is that I can navigate by myself. I don't need help. Maybe I can't do it as well as I can with help, but I can do it and so can you and so can my nine-year-old. That's a fundamental shift in the last couple of years, and it profoundly changes the mechanisms

***"Communications is king —
content is only a prince."***

and values involved.

And, finally, I can publish by myself. Again, not very well, and I've got some difficult issues around advertising and quality assurance and all of that. But I can do it, and it's getting better. This is not going to go away, and it's going to accelerate as the issues are inevitably addressed.

All of these are shifts away from institutional control mechanisms that I think are very important, and deep. Any massive social or institutional change always creates predictable reactions. This one is no different. First is the Luddite reaction, or full cry denial — "no computer can ever replace my

book or my brain" or whatever. There's nothing new here. Remember *Desk Set* — that old **Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy** movie — it's must be almost 50 years old. At least half a century ago we started wrestling with some of these issues. Thankfully, I think we're mostly through that stage. We rarely hear a truly luddite-like reaction from this podium.

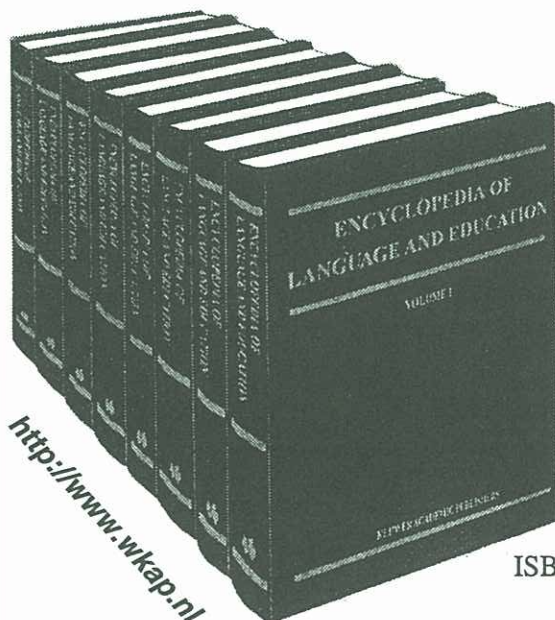
Then comes what we might call preservation behavior. Existing institutions attempt to mold their behavior to make the world look like it did before — to them, at least. Publishers will offer their information electronically, but make you subscribe to it, so they can guarantee a stable income. This sometimes is under the guise of "site licensing" or "statewide licensing" or whatever. It is not necessarily bad — in fact, preservation stage offerings are often great steps forward, but they are essentially stop-gap measures which sometimes effectively buy time and space for truly revolutionary forms to emerge. We are right now approaching the end of the preservation stage and are in the beginning of the third stage — the invention and establishment of new forms.

These usually begin as experiments with little economic justification, and the best of them survive to become the models of whatever new paradigms will emerge. They are edible omelets. I think of the various hybrid e-journals, or perhaps better, experiments like **BioMedNet**, as the first of these omelets.

continued on page 47

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

The most current and comprehensive reference work in the field



- State-of-the-art reviews
- More than 200 research topics in eight volumes
- Over 200 contributors from more than 40 countries
- Extensive cross referencing within and between volumes
- International in scope and approach
- Wide ranging analyses and evaluation of current research
- Subject index
- Extensive and up-to-date bibliographies

ISBN 0-7923-4596-7 (hardbound, 8 vols.)
\$899.00 after 4/30/98

**Special
Introductory
price of
\$739.00**
valid until 4/30/98

*Available
from your
vendor*

**Kluwer
academic
publishers**



Physics Bestsellers
from page 46

Perspectives in Quantum Hall Effects: Novel Quantum Liquids in Low-Dimensional Semiconductor Structures; ed. by Sankar Das Sarma. John Wiley, 1997. 047111216x cloth \$74.95

Pfalzner, Susanne. *Many-Body Tree Methods in Physics*. Cambridge Univ Press, 1996. 0521495644 cloth \$49.95

Polyak, Ilya. *Computational Statistics in Climatology*. Oxford Univ Press, 1996. 0195099990 cloth \$65.00

Quantum Physics, Chaos Theory, and Cosmology; ed. by Mikio Namiki. Amer Inst of Physics-AIP, 1996. 1563965445 cloth \$65.00

Ridley, B.K. *Electrons and Phonons in Semiconductor Multilayers*. Cambridge Univ Press, 1997. 0521474922 cloth \$69.95

Robinett, Richard W. (Richard Wallace). *Quantum Mechanics: Classical Results, Modern Systems, and Visualized Examples*. Oxford Univ Press, 1997. 0195092023 cloth \$65.00

Snygg, John. Clifford. *Algebra: A Computational Tool for Physicists*. Oxford Univ Press, 1997. 0195098242 cloth \$85.00

Steele, Charles W. *Numerical Computation of Electric and Magnetic Fields*.

Chapman & Hall, 1997. 0412086212 cloth \$69.95

Strobl, Gert R., 1941- *Physics of Polymers: Concepts for Understanding their Structures and Behavior*. Springer-Verlag, 1996. 3540607684 paper \$39.00

Swartz, Clifford E. *Teaching Introductory Physics: A Sourcebook*. Amer Inst of Physics-AIP, 1997. 1563963205 cloth \$75.00

Transport Properties of Fluids: Their Correlation, Prediction and Estimation; ed. by Jurgen Millat. Cambridge Univ Press, 1996. 0521461782 cloth \$90.00

Tribble, Alan C., 1961- *Princeton Guide to Advanced Physics*. Princeton Univ Press, 1996. 069102670x cloth \$59.50

Weinberg, Steven. *Quantum Theory of Fields; V. II: Modern Applications*. Cambridge Univ Press, 1996. 0521550025 cloth \$47.95

Westgard, James B. *Electrodynamics: A Concise Introduction*. Springer-Verlag, 1997. 0387945857 cloth \$49.00

X-Rays: The First Hundred Years; ed. by Alan Michette. John Wiley, 1996. 0471965022 cloth \$69.95

Yndurain, F.J. *Relativistic Quantum Mechanics and Introduction To Field Theory*. Springer-Verlag, 1996. 3540604537 cloth \$59.00

The Egg Is Broken
from page 45

Given what we know about the ingredients, then, let's venture a few guidelines for picking omelets off the menu, assuming that we want edible ones.

1. Follow the money. In the final analysis, only economically viable offerings will last.

2. Look for consumer convenience. A couple of years ago I argued in this forum that content is king. I don't think so any more. **Becky Lenzini** found a quote the other day that said "communications is king — content is only a prince." I think that's right, in almost all contexts, which leads to the next point.

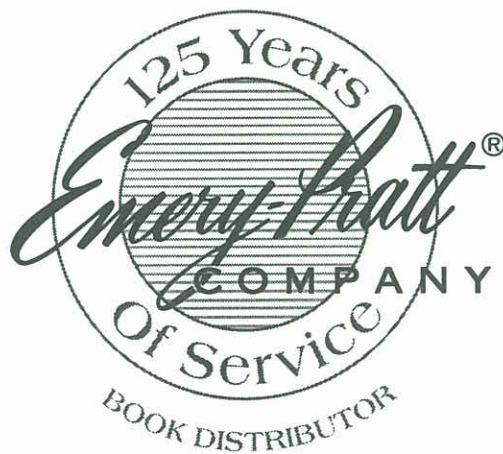
3. Make sure you are thinking clearly about the specific informing activities being supported. What is true for newspapers is not true for STM journals, even though both are called publishing.

4. Watch the underlying characteristics — technical, economic, and scope — of distribution. This is the traditional middleman role. Both publishers and libraries are at core distributors, and this will make this topic the hardest of all for us to think about, because it is us.

5. Finally, watch for the overall effects on societies, however big or small. These will never control, but they may well dampen, the speed at which things happen.

Who will make the omelet? Who knows? There will be many of them. Some will even be good.

From ordering to invoicing, libraries all across the country are designing service to meet their needs. Why shouldn't you?



1966 W. Main Street • Owosso, MI 48867-1397
Phone Toll-Free 1 800 248-3887 • Fax Toll-Free 1 800 523-6379
e-mail: custserv@emery-pratt.com • <http://www.emery-pratt.com>